

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

Alexander Sehmer

BRIEFS

p.3

James Pothecary

Syria's Conflict: Managing Turkey's Intervention

p.5

Zana K. Gulmohamad

Pakistan's Jamaat-ul-Ahrar: A Violent Domestic Threat

p.7

Animesh Roul

Nigeria Expands Its 'War on Terrorism' to the Niger Delta

INDONESIA: LONE-WOLF ATTACKS SHOW NEED FOR GREATER DERADICALIZATION EFFORTS

Alexander Sehmer

On August 28, an 18-year-old Indonesian man attempted to stab a Roman Catholic priest during a church service in Medan, in Indonesia's North Sumatra province, an attack reminiscent of one carried out by Islamic State (IS) sympathizers in France in July in which an 84-year-old priest had his throat slit.

In the failed Medan attack, however, the priest was only lightly injured. A homemade bomb, which the assailant reportedly carried in his backpack, failed to explode, and the man was detained by worshipers and later arrested (Jakarta Post, August 28). The suspect appears to have had no established links to IS, but was, authorities said, "obsessed" with international terrorism. Police reportedly found a note in his bag that read, "I love al-Baghdadi," a reference to the IS leader (Jakarta Post, August 29).

As a result, Indonesia's National Counterterrorism Agency has probed a possible connection to Muhammad Bahrin Naim, an Indonesian militant thought to be

in Raqqa, Syria (Jakarta Post, September 8). Naim, who was arrested in 2010 and spent time in jail for the illegal possession of ammunition, has been accused of masterminding a deadly attack in the capital Jakarta on January 14 (Al Jazeera, January 15). More recently he has also been implicated in a failed suicide bombing at a police station in Solo, in Central Java, carried out on July 5. Naim allegedly taught the attacker, the only casualty in the blast, how to build a bomb (Straits Times, July 5).

Many of Naim's recruits have been drawn from Solo, from local mosques and an anti-vice campaign group known as Team Hisbah, which functioned as kind of vigilante militia attacking brothels and breaking up drinking parties. The Solo attacker, whose failed bombing efforts drew ridicule on social media, has been identified as Nur Rohman, an inexperienced Team Hisbah member.

Like Rohman, the suspect in the Medan church attack seems to have been equally inexperienced and just as unsuccessful, but the connection with Naim, whose associates appear to come most frequently from his hometown of Solo, is unclear. Naim is active online, but he is far from the only Indonesian militant with a network in the country and as the existence of groups such as Team

Hisbah make clear, there is a relatively large pool of potential recruits from which these various organizations can draw.

While Indonesian counter-terrorism efforts have reduced the effectiveness of more established jihadi organizations such as Jemmah Islamiyah, lone-wolf attackers inspired by Naim and his ilk pose a different threat and underscore the importance of greater deradicalization efforts.

LIBYA: MORE POLITICKING WITH THE COUNTRY'S OIL PORTS

Alexander Sehmer

While forces allied with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) have been battling Islamic State (IS) for control of the city of Sirte, the Libyan National Army (LNA) has seized control of oil facilities along the country's northern coast (Libya Herald, September 11). Operation Sudden Lightning (*al-Barq al-Khatif*), which was launched on September 11, has successfully put the forces of the anti-Islamist General Khalifa Haftar in control of four of Libya's oil terminals – Brega, Ras Lanuf, Es-Sidr and Zueitina (al-Jazeera, September 14). The operation appears to have encountered little resistance, although there were reports of fighting at the Zueitania terminal (Libya Herald, September 12).

Since the collapse of Muammar Gadhafi's regime in 2011, control of Libya's once centralized oil assets has been a way for various groups to acquire political clout (See Terrorism Monitor, May 27).

Of the four terminals, three – the exception being Brega – were controlled by the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG), led by Ibrahim al-Jadhran, whose forces have aided the Sirte campaign. The LNA for its part has been sitting out the battle for Sirte. Haftar has little love for the UN-backed GNA, established in December 2015, instead backing the Tobruk-based House of Representatives.

While the United States, Britain, France and others have condemned Haftar's oil port offensive, the general is not without international backing. He has varying levels of support from the likes of France, Egypt, the Gulf States and Russia, and there have been reports of UAE pilots flying sorties on behalf of the LNA (Middle East Eye, September 14).

Haftar's actions are a setback for the UN's plans in Libya and could deal an economic blow to the country, which has already seen its oil exports slump to well below the 1.6 billion barrels per day it was producing prior to the 2011 uprising.

However, the general has indicated the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC) will be able to resume exports from the terminal (al-Arabiya, September 14). This is a

pragmatic move on Haftar's part as it is unlikely the LNA would have been able to export the oil – al-Jadhran experienced a similar problem until he reached an agreement with the GNA earlier in the year.

Control of the terminals is, then, likely more a bargaining chip for Haftar, to be deployed once the GNA and its allies have defeated IS in Sirte. That moment, despite rearguard action by IS fighters who have fled the city – there have been several attacks reported on supply lines between Misrata and Sirte in recent weeks– appears to be drawing increasingly close (Libya Herald, September 11).

Syria's Conflict: Managing Turkey's Intervention

James Potheary

On August 24, Turkish armor, infantry, and air units crossed the Syrian border and, in conjunction with the Ankara-supported Free Syrian Army (FSA) Sunni-dominated rebel group, launched a full-scale assault on the Islamic State-controlled city of Jarabulus. Simultaneously, the Turkish-FSA force moved against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) rebel movement in northern Syria, which had recently captured a number of villages and towns west of the Euphrates River from Islamic State (IS) forces.

The Turkish offensive, code-named "Euphrates Shield," is aimed at clearing Islamist and Kurdish forces from the Syrian side of the Syria-Turkey border. It addresses strategic concerns for Turkey, but is informed by domestic and international politics and has potentially grave implications for the Syrian conflict more widely, as well as for Washington's regional influence.

Strategic Thinking

Why has Turkey decided to strike now? Certainly, Ankara was provoked by IS. The Islamist group has launched a number of attacks using suicide improvised explosive devices (SIED) and small arms in Turkey over the past year, including one in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square on January 12, which killed 13 tourists, as well as the June 28 attack on Istanbul's Atatürk Airport. In the latest incident, on August 22, an SIED was detonated at a wedding in the southeastern city of Gaziantep, causing the Turkish foreign minister to declare that the IS presence across the border must be "cleansed" (Hurriyet Daily News, August 22).

However, it was the YPG's capture of territory west of the Euphrates, bringing the PYD one step closer to uniting its disparate cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani into one contiguous territory, which was the primary driver behind Turkish intervention. Ankara regards the PYD and its associated groups as a threat to its own security. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly stated that the PYD is synonymous with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been fighting a 32-year

insurgency in Turkey's south-eastern provinces for Kurdish independence (Andalou Agency, August 3). A united Kurdish proto-state on Turkey's southern flank, bordering Gaziantep, Mardin and Şanlıurfa sub-regions, areas where the PKK is combatting the Turkish military, is a situation Ankara will not countenance. Such a scenario could, through Turkey's eyes, see the PKK using PYD territory as a safe haven, and the PYD funneling arms across the border.

Turkey's threat-assessment is reasonable. Although the United States – which designates the PKK as a terrorist group but supports the PYD as one of the more effective Syrian rebel groups fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and IS – argues that the two groups are separate, there is evidence to contradict this (eKurd Daily, March 24). PYD weapon systems have been found by security forces in PKK safe-houses in northern Iraq, and on March 11 a PYD official was arrested in the border town of Cizre on suspicion of smuggling ammunition to the PKK (Daily Sabah, October 16, 2015; Yeni Safak, March 11).

Even so, Ankara also overstates the situation when it says the PKK and PYD are synonymous. Each group has its own command-and-control structures and territorial objectives, though the two are partially connected – particularly in the facilitation of weapons across the border. Yet, Kurdish forces have crossed Turkish “red lines” before without suffering such penalties. In December 2015, Kurdish-led forces seized the Tishrin Dam, a strategic location around 66 km south of Jarabulus byroad, which allowed Kurdish forces to project power west of the Euphrates. The Kurdish forces ignored Turkish warnings such moves would spark a heavy military response (al-Monitor, October 26, 2015). Barring some limited air strikes, however, the promised retaliation never came.

Unilateral Action

To understand “why now” requires looking beyond the strategic and focusing on the political dimensions. Turkey's rapprochement with Russia in June 2016 has given it operational freedom in northern Syria. Anti-Kurdish and anti-IS operations alone would not have brought Ankara into direct opposition to Moscow. However, the previously poor relations between the two countries, following the Turkish downing of a Russian military aircraft in December 2015, meant that any inadvertent confrontation between the two sides would have entailed an unacceptable risk of war.

As relations with Russia have improved, those with the United States, which has discouraged anti-PYD action, have become strained. Washington has refused to extradite cleric Fethullah Gülen, who Ankara regards as responsible for July's failed coup by a military faction (AP, August 25). Furthermore, Ankara is infuriated by U.S. criticism of its post-coup purge of suspected Gülenists (International Business Times, July 18). Euphrates Shield is an opportunity for Turkey to demonstrate it can act unilaterally and to remind the United States that it cannot control Turkish foreign policy.

Moreover, there is a strong domestic incentive for military action. The post-coup political environment in Turkey is unstable, marked by mass-arrests and the concentration of power in the hands of the presidency. The deployment of the military abroad gives the Turkish high command a chance to restore its battered reputation and occupies a fighting force that might, without distraction, launch a second coup attempt.

Impact on Syria's Civil War

The Turkish-FSA operation is the latest blow to Western hopes of removing President Assad, whose regime forces are conducting a resurgent campaign nationwide. Euphrates Shield further fragments the opposition, leaving Assad with strategic breathing space in northern Syria. Meanwhile, regime forces have effectively isolated the city of Aleppo, IS is losing ground on all fronts, and Russian airpower has provided the muscle Assad's military needed to turn the tide of the war.

Furthermore, China has quietly escalated its support for the Assad regime, floating the possibility of military cooperation (see China Brief, August 22). Stronger Chinese support strengthens Assad's international position. By reinforcing the regime's diplomatic bulwarks, any potential Western-led intervention is further discouraged.

Rivals and Allies

The Turkish operation shifts the balance-of-power towards the regime. Despite Ankara's diplomatic rhetoric that Assad must go, its immediate strategic priorities actually align with the Syrian regime, reducing the likelihood of Assad's removal from office as part of any political settlement to end the civil war.

For the United States, the response has so far been a balancing act between two allies. U.S. Vice President Joe Biden called on Kurdish forces to retreat across the Euphrates, saying that the Kurds will lose U.S. support unless they withdraw (al-Monitor, August 24). Simultaneously, U.S. policymakers have put pressure on Turkey to limit military actions against YPG forces (Hurriyet Daily News, August 31). This involves treading a tight-rope between both factions, but more robust action risks alienating either Turkey or the PYD. Neither is a palatable option.

The United States is constrained by its lack of coercive capability on the ground. In order to manage the situation it will be necessary to be crystal clear on the political conditions attached to aid, both to Turkey and the PYD, and consistent in applying censure when those conditions are disregarded. Anything less risks allowing two crucial allies to wage full-scale war in northern Syria, a confrontation that could easily spread into southern Turkey and further destabilize an already chaotic region.

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Pakistan's Jamaat-ul-Ahrar: A Violent Domestic Threat

Animesh Roul

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), once a disgruntled breakaway faction of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has been behind a series of deadly attacks across Pakistan since March 2016, apparently contradicting the Pakistani Army's claim to have eliminated terrorism from North Waziristan and the Khyber Agency through years of its counter-terrorism operation Zarb-e-Azb (Daily Times, September 01).

Led by Omar Khalid Khorasani (a.k.a. Abdul Wali), a fire-brand Taliban commander from Mohamand agency, JuA has been behind at least six major terrorist incidents this year, primarily targeting minorities, Christians in particular, and in August was named a specially designated global terrorist (SDGT) group by the United States.

Khorasani has in the past called for the establishment of a global caliphate and expressed the intention of seizing Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in order to defend Islam. While he has more recently disavowed some of his group's more international pretensions, JuA's many grisly strikes on Pakistani soil have brought immense notoriety to the group of late.

Relationship with the Taliban

The long suppressed leadership rift within the Pakistani Taliban's rank and file was brought into the open in late August 2014, when TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah banished Khorasani from the organization, accusing him of conspiracy against Mullah Omar, then the Taliban leader. He also exposed Khorasani's secret ties with other disgruntled sectarian Taliban leaders and groups such as Junud-al-Hafsa and Ahrar ul Hind, and that he had formed a group under the JuA's hybrid Jihadi banner (Dawn, September 7, 2014).

Reports suggested that the discord began when Khorasani was overlooked for TTP's top post and sidelined following the death of Hakimullah Mehsud in November 2013, in favor of Mullah Fazalullah, who was eventually given the post of Taliban leader in Pakistan.

Before the JuA was established, Omar Khalid Khorasani and other Taliban commanders led Ahrar-ul-Hind, a TTP splinter group that envisaged consolidating the entire Indian subcontinent under Taliban rule, and carried out suicide bombings in Quetta and Peshawar in March 2014 in which 19 people were killed (Express Tribune, March 15, 2014).

However, in March 2015, less than a year after its split with the TTP, JuA realigned itself into the larger Taliban conglomerate and joined with TTP-Fazlullah and another Taliban splinter group, Lashkar-e-Islam, purportedly to put up a united front against the Pakistani military's Operation Zarb-e-Azb.

Even in brief period after its split from the TTP, Khorasani retained the name of the TTP as prefix to the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (TTP-JuA). The leadership of JuA claimed in the Taliban magazine Ihyae Khilafat, that TTP-JuA had come into being as result of a "restructuring" of the Pakistani Mujahideen, though it failed to mention the falling out with Mullah Fazlullah in transparent terms. It also reiterated the existing ideological differences between JuA and other militant organizations in Pakistan.

Recent JuA Operations

The latest JuA attack took place on September 2, when a suicide strike targeted lawyers and security personnel at a court in Mardan District in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province, killing 13 people and injuring over 40 others (Dawn [Karachi], September 2; Geo TV News, September 2). Earlier in the day, JuA militants had targeted a Christian dominated neighborhood in Peshawar, triggering a gun battle between the security forces that left one member of the minority Christian community and four attackers dead (Dawn, September 2).

Similar attacks targeting lawyers took place in Quetta on August 8, killing 75 people, including 55 lawyers, when hundreds of lawyers and journalists had gathered at the Civil Hospital to mourn the killing of Balochistan Bar Association President Bilal Anwar Kasi (Daily Pakistan, August 8; Express Tribune, August 8). Kasi had been assassinated earlier in the day near Manno Jan road, Quetta city. JuA spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan claimed responsibility for the Quetta hospital attack and threatened further violence "until the imposition of an Islamic system in Pakistan."

March 2016, however, remains JuA's most violent month, with three major attacks, starting with the March 7 Court Complex attack in Charsadda's Shabqadar area, which killed nearly 17 people (Dawn, March 7). The Charsadda attack was executed to avenge the death of Mumtaz Qadri, who was convicted of killing former Punjab governor Salman Taseer in January 2011.

In late March, JuA targeted the Gulshan-e-Iqbal amusement park in Lahore during Easter day celebrations, killing more than 70 people including women and children. The attack was targeted at the minority Christian community celebrating Easter at the park. JuA spokesman Ehsan called the attack a message for the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In an Urdu-language statement he said: "We want to send this message to [the] Prime Minister ... that we have entered Lahore. He can do what he wants but he won't be able to stop us. Our suicide bombers will continue these attacks" (The Nation, March 27).

Targeting Minorities

The Gulshan-e-Iqbal attack was not the only time JuA targeted Christians in Lahore. In mid-March 2015, the group bombed a number of churches in the Youhanabad town of Lahore, killing about 14 people and injuring many more during Sunday service (Express Tribune, March 15, 2015).

Beyond the vulnerable Christian minorities and the law practitioners in Lahore, JuA militants have also targeted education centers. The death and devastation at the Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park in Lahore was reminiscent of December 2014 Peshawar School attack, also perpetrated by the JuA, in which over 150 people, largely school children, lost their lives. Khorasani claimed responsibility for the devastating attack on the army private school, describing it as revenge for Operation Zarb-e-Azb's activities in the tribal areas (Express Tribune, December 21, 2014). He said in a statement: "We targeted the school because the Army targets our families. We want them to feel our pain" (iTV News, December 16, 2014).

Support for Transnational Groups

When Khorasani started to organize JuA under his leadership, he had the support of other Taliban commanders, primarily from Pakistan's Orakzai agency, Bajour agency and his own Mohmand agency. Many senior Tal-

iban commanders, including the founders of the TTP, such as Moulana Qasim Khorasani and Moulvi Omar, have joined the ranks of JuA. Other commanders who have joined the JuA are Qari Shakeel Haqqani (Charsadda), Maulana Yasin (Swat), Mufti Mishbah (Peshawar) and Qari Ismail (Khyber) (Pakistan Today, August 26, 2014).

JuA's leaders have vowed to defeat the Pakistani army because it obstructs the implementation of sharia in Pakistan. JuA also, somewhat ambitiously, has designs on Kashmir and even beyond. In October 2014 Khorasani, along with his cohorts, even released a video urging al-Qaeda's Jabhat al Nusra in Syria and Islamic State (IS) to reconcile with each other and proposing that he could mediate between the warring jihadi groups in Syria. [1] This posturing of JuA's leadership was likely aimed at drawing the attention of IS or al-Qaeda and enhancing its stature within the domestic jihadi landscape.

The designation by the United States in early August of JuA as a global terrorist group – a move that allows for sanctions against the group and its members – prompted Khorasani to openly criticize the United States and deny any ties with transnational jihadi groups.

Irrespective of his denials, JuA leaders have openly supported the transnational jihadi ideals that both al-Qaeda and IS have espoused. The group also proved its resilience in the face of a number of military offensives in the past, and its recent actions indicate it has survived the ongoing operations of the Pakistani army, something that augers poorly for Pakistan.

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NOTES

[1] Video available (in Arabic): <https://archive.org/details/lhyaemasalihat>

Nigeria Expands Its 'War on Terrorism' to the Niger Delta

Andrew McGregor

Though Nigeria's southern Delta region has abundant oil reserves that should provide amply for the future of both the region and the nation, the Delta has become consumed by environmental degradation, unrestrained oil theft, destruction of infrastructure and a new wave of anti-government militancy complicated by ethnic friction and political rivalries.

Large stretches of the Delta region have little to no government presence or infrastructure of any kind. [1] For many residents, their only contact with the government occurs when troops arrive searching for militants or oil thieves. Delta residents complain routinely of being treated as militants, potential militants or supporters of the militants.

Nonetheless, government impatience with the seemingly endless instability that threatens the oil-dependent national economy boiled over at a recent African development conference in Nairobi, where Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari was quoted as saying: "The militants must dialogue with the federal government or be dealt with in the same way [as] Boko Haram. We are talking to some of their leaders. We will deal with them as we dealt with Boko Haram if they refuse to talk to us" (Naij.com [Lagos], August 30).

The threat to treat secular Delta militants in the same fashion as Boko Haram's Islamist fighters reflects the frustration of bringing an end to one group's operations only to see several new militant groups pop up in its place. More importantly, it is a sign that Nigeria's federal government recognizes there will be an economic crisis unless something is done quickly. Nigeria's budget assumes a daily production of 2.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of oil, providing 70 percent of national revenues. The actions of the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and other groups has lowered daily production by 700,000 bpd to 1.56 million bpd in the last few months. On September 4, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) warned that "If the current situation remains unchecked, it could lead to the crippling of the corporation and the nation's oil and gas sector, the mainstay of the Nigerian economy" (Reuters, September 5).

An expensive war in the northeast and low international crude prices only exacerbate the problem. Buhari, already dealing with a recession, is unlikely to want to be remembered as the president who oversaw the collapse of Nigerian federalism, though this remains a danger if the government is unable to provide development programs, services, security and government salaries and pensions due to a loss of oil revenues.

The Military Approach

To help address the crisis in the Delta creeks, Operation Crocodile Smile was launched on August 29. The new military operation joins the ongoing Operation Delta Safe, a military effort launched in late June and led by the all-arms Joint Task Force (JTF) aimed at ending bunkering and other forms of crude oil theft (*The Sun* [Lagos] June 26).

Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant-General Tukur Buratai explained the purpose of the exercise:

“Operation Crocodile Smile ... is an exercise aimed at training our men on amphibious warfare because of the peculiarity of the terrain that requires special training. This exercise is also important because of the need to build the capacity of our men, which has been neglected for a very long time” (Vanguard, September 8).

The Nigerian defense spokesman added that the operation was designed to provide security for Delta residents, and the region’s economic assets, while demonstrating the ability of security forces to rein in criminals and “economic saboteurs” (Vanguard [Lagos], August 29; Premium Times [Abuja], September 6).

The operation involves an estimated 3,000 Nigerian Army troops, along with air and naval elements. Most of the troops involved belong to the army’s 4th Brigade, based in Benin City, Edo State, and the 13th Brigade based in Calabar, Cross River State. Calabar is home to the Nigerian army’s amphibious training school, which is playing a large training role in the operation.

Transport and firepower for raids in the largely road-less creeks region is provided by gunboats and speedboats. For operations on firmer turf, the Nigerian army’s Armored Corps has contributed two main battle tanks (likely the British-built Vickers MBT or Russian-built T-55s or T-72s), two South African-built MRAP (Mine-Resistant, Ambush Protected) armored personnel carriers and

three British-built FV101 Scorpion reconnaissance vehicles.

On September 10, Chief of Army Staff Tukur Buratai announced the creation of a new brigade, the 61st, to be based in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State with the aim of increasing security in the Delta region (TVC News [Lagos], September 10). According to Buratai, the army plans to have 10,000 troops operating in the Delta by 2017.

Objections to Operation Crocodile Smile

Operation Crocodile Smile has been far from universally welcomed. Colonel Abubakr Umar (Ret.), the influential former military governor of Kaduna State, issued a statement on August 30 claiming that the Niger Delta militants could not be called terrorists “in the real sense of the word,” adding that military operations in the densely populated Delta faced major challenges, including difficult terrain, the possibility of setting the oil-polluted creeks on fire with explosives, international opposition, and the danger of inadvertently shutting down oil and gas operations in the entire region (*Punch* [Lagos], August 30).

Ijaw representatives claim the military operations target their community unjustly and complain the military approach comes at a time when a negotiated settlement looked promising. At the same time, JTF personnel have been accused of demolishing homes, beating up residents and stealing speedboats in Ijaw communities.

The commander of Operation Delta Safe, Rear Admiral Joseph Okojie, however, has insisted the Nigerian army is “people-friendly” and has prioritized the protection of lives and property (*This Day* [Lagos], September 9). [2]

The “people-friendly” aspect of Operation Crocodile Smile involves school-building, infrastructure rehabilitation and the provision of health services in areas that have seen little improvement from the riches drawn from their region. For General Buratai, the inclusion of these services trumps accusations of human-rights abuses during the offensive. “How can people grumble when we have medical outreach in their communities, there is no way they can grumble ... we are supporting the communities, they are happy,” he said (*Vanguard* [Lagos], September 6).

Active Militant Groups in the Niger Delta

The lack of unity or any common approach amongst the Delta militants is a major impediment to reaching a negotiated settlement. Federal government negotiations with elders and stakeholders in the Delta region reached an impasse in August when Delta representatives demanded a payment of NGN 8 billion (\$25.37 million) to continue, a demand President Buhari rejected (Sahara Reporters, August 6). The impasse left dialogue in the hands of a MEND-supported negotiating team, Aaron2, operating as part of the Niger Delta Dialogue Contact Group (NDDCG) led by Foreign Minister Henry Odein Ajumogobia, formerly the minister of state petroleum resources, and King Alfred Diète-Spiff. [3] Many smaller Delta-based ethnic groups claim the NDDCG represents only Ijaw interests.

As seen from the list below – which due to the sheer number of factions active in the region does not pretend to be comprehensive – some groups are at odds with each other as much as with the federal government:

Aggrieved Youth Movement (AYM): This group is composed mainly of amnestied militants based in Rivers State. AYM claims to be non-violent and against the destruction of oil and gas installations. The group has warned other militant groups to stay out of Rivers State (*Daily Post* [Lagos], September 5).

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB): A secessionist group that has given its support to the NDA. Its leader is Nnamdi Kanu, the self-styled “president” of Biafra, is currently imprisoned.

Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF): Only several months old, this group claims to be affiliated with the NDA and has threatened to use missiles in its possession to shoot down military helicopters (International Business Times, June 2). In late June, members of the group told media sources they had been approached by senior Nigerian military officers interested in enlisting the group’s support for a coup against President Buhari, though the claim is likely baseless (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 24).

Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB): A secessionist group led by Ralph Uwazurike. Allegedly non-violent (though this is disputed by the government), the group has pledged

“total allegiance” to the NDA (The Trent Online [Lagos], August 11).

Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND): This group is largely inactive since most of its leaders are imprisoned or have accepted the 2009 amnesty. MEND still seeks a role in Delta-related negotiations and has warned it will not talk to the government if Ijaw leader Chief Edwin Clark is appointed to speak for the Delta (Pulse.ng, August 22). MEND has threatened to take up arms against the NDA if it does not pursue dialogue with the government and recently declared “its full support for the ongoing military presence in the Niger Delta region” through its spokesman Jomo Gbomo (a pseudonym used by a number of Delta militants) (Pulse.ng, August 21).

Niger Delta Avengers (NDA): The NDA’s declared aim is to reduce Nigerian oil output to zero with a minimum of casualties. The NDA declared a unilateral ceasefire on August 29 and has expressed its interest in holding talks with the government, though it accused Buhari of organizing “a pre-determined genocide” in the Delta and warned the army that “no amount of troop surge and simulation exercises will make you win the oil war” (NigerDeltaAvengers.org, August 29). Ijaw Youth Council president Udengs Eradiri is alleged to be the NDA’s chief spokesman, ‘Brigadier General’ Murdoch Agbinobo (Pulse.ng, August 20).

New Niger Delta Emancipation Front (NNDLF): A new group whose only known leader is Lucky Humphrey, its so-called “director of public enlightenment and awareness.” The NNDLF rejects the “narrow interests” pursued by the militants and applauds Buhari’s military intervention to root out the militant groups (*This Day* [Lagos], September 8).

Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate (NDGJM): A Delta State group dominated by members of the Urhobo ethnic group, the largest in the state. Commanded by Aldo Agbalaja, the group believes President Buhari is committing “genocide” in the Niger Delta and followed a strike on a major trunk delivery line in Delta State by warning employees at a number of energy facilities to abandon their plants “because what is coming to those facilities [is] beyond what anybody has seen before” (Sahara Reporters, August 30). The NDGJM responded to the launch of Operation Crocodile Smile by bombing the Ogor-Oteri pipeline. The group opposes

what it sees as one-sided government negotiations with the region's much larger Ijaw ethnic group and its leader, 84-year-old Chief Edwin Clark, who they see as only "the leader of the Ijaw nation." (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 10). The group would prefer to join in talks led by King Alfred Diете-Spiff (*Pulse.ng*, August 23).

Niger Delta Red Squad (RDRS): Operates in Imo State, active for three months. Spokesman is "General" Don Wannie (or Waney) (*Naij.com* [Lagos], September 1). The Red Squad has attacked pipelines operated by the Nigeria Agip Oil Company (a Nigerian-Italian joint venture), citing its alleged neglect of local communities. The group has threatened to behead any security agents it manages to seize (*Naij.com* [Lagos], September 1).

Niger Delta Searchlight: Commanded by "General" Igbede N Igbede, this group rejects negotiations with the government and claims it will continue a bombing campaign until oil companies abandon the Delta region (*Daily Post* [Lagos], August 30).

Otugas Fire Force (OFF): The OFF is commanded by "General" Gabriel Ogbudge, who was arrested by the Nigerian Army's 4th Brigade on September 6 during a raid in Edo State. Ogbudge is the primary suspect in the August 26 demolition of a major Nigerian Petroleum Development Company/Shoreline trunk delivery line. On August 31, Ogbudge declared the launch of Operation Crocodile Tears, the group's response to the government's Operation Crocodile Smile. The OFF was alleged to be planning an attack on the Utorogu gas plant (*Punch* [Lagos], September 7; *Naij.com*, September 7).

Reformed Egbesu Boys of Niger Delta: The group rejects any dialogue led by the NDDCG and aims for a total shutdown in oil production in the Delta (*Vanguard*, July 22). Egbesu is the Ijaw god of warfare and the group is as much a religious cult as a militant formation. The group's leaders are "General" Tony Alagbakerewei and Commander Ebi Abakoromor.

Reformed Niger Delta Avengers (RNDA): The alleged leader of this NDA offshoot is one Jude Kekyll, whom the NDA denies was ever a member of their group (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 6). The NDA maintains that the RNDA is a creation of Buhari's government and does not represent a split in the movement. Meanwhile, the RNDA says it split from the NDA to pursue dialogue with the government and to avoid further environmental

destruction of the Delta region (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 6).

The Mysterious Cynthia Whyte

A sensational RNDA statement issued in August by "spokesperson" Cynthia Whyte identified a number of prominent Nigerians as sponsors of the NDA, including former president Goodluck Jonathan (which it accused of being the "grand patron" of the NDA), governors Nyesom Wike (Rivers State) and Seriki Dickson (Bayelsa State), former Akwa Ibom State Senator Godswill Akpabio and fugitive militant leader Government Ekpemupolo (aka Tompolo) (*Sahara Reporters*, August 6; *Sahara Reporters*, August 16).

Former president Jonathan responded to the accusations by noting that Cynthia Whyte was a name used for an earlier spokesperson for the Joint Revolutionary Council (an umbrella group for Delta militants) beginning in 2005 and suggested that, like MEND at the height of its power, the RNDA was intent on assassinating him (*Punch*, August 8). However, an individual using the official Cynthia Whyte email address claimed that the recent RNDA statements delivered under that name were those of an imposter. The "real" Cynthia Whyte blamed the RNDA fraud on "retired militant leaders from Bayelsa and Delta State who have made lots of money in past time through character blackmail and sabotage" (*The Trent Online* [Lagos], August 11).

There are suspicions that Cynthia Whyte is a pseudonym lately appropriated by the imprisoned Charles Okah. Charles is the brother of MEND leader Henry Okah, currently serving a sentence in South Africa (*Elombah.com* [London], August 21). The NDA believes the name Cynthia Whyte may have been resurrected by George Kerley, a Rivers State social activist and supporter of the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), though they claim the content (described as "delusional") originated with Victor Ebikabowei-Ben (a.k.a. Boyloaf), an amnestied ex-MEND leader (*Today* [Lagos], August 8; *Nigerian Nation*, August 8).

Though the list of alleged sponsors is largely unverifiable and probably inflated (if it has any basis in reality at all), it has helped fuel an incendiary Nigerian political environment where suspicion of treachery is the order of the day.

Deepening the Divide

Negotiations imply recognition and, if successful, tend to lead to some form of legitimacy for insurgent groups. This was the case with the last generation of Niger Delta militants, many of whom now receive generous government payments to keep in line.

Negotiating with the NDA and its allies and rivals may encourage new movements to seek eventual status and wealth by issuing statements and taking to the creeks to blow up a few pipelines, creating a perpetual and debilitating cycle of rebellion-negotiation-cash settlement.

However, folding the conflict into Nigeria's broader "war on terrorism" is unlikely to produce anything other than short-term results, while encouraging the return of southern separatism and deepening Nigeria's north-south divide.

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NOTES

[1] The Niger Delta consists of the following states: Ondo, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom and Cross River.

[2] Operation Delta Safe replaced Operation Pulo Shield in June 2016.

[3] Diете-Spiff's title indicates he is one of Nigeria's traditional rulers – in this case the Amanyanabo (King) of Twon-Brass, a community in southern Bayelsa State.